TikTok and Researcher Positionality: Considering the Methodological and Ethical Implications of an Experimental Digital Ethnography

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Abstract

In this article I examine the opportunities and challenges arising from an experimental digital ethnography I conducted as a digital content creator in response to social restrictions during COVID-19. To explore the perceptions and performances of masculinity among young Uzbek men in Uzbekistan, I created 50 TikTok videos between 2021 and 2022. These videos received more than 300,000 likes in total, not only significantly broadening the reach of my research recruitment but also serving as a substantial source of ethnographic data during the pandemic. Throughout the creation of these digital videos, I assumed a dual role as an agent in the research and an object of observation. This dual role underscores the agency of both researchers and the researched in navigating the digital platform, which allows for the challenging of conventional research gazes and relationships. This digital approach also unveils the complex spatial dynamics that underlie interactions in both online and offline realms, shedding light on how digital platforms can both enhance and constrain research efforts. Moreover, this article delves into the ethical implications of this experimental digital ethnography, which revolve around potential physical and mental risks to researchers, challenges related to the re-definition of research participation, and issues pertaining to obtaining informed consent. The findings provide insights and make contributions to problematising the conceptualisation of digital spaces, online communities/publics and digital ethnography. I conclude by offering insights for researchers who face restrictions in field access or are interested in studying youth culture on social media platforms, particularly in the role of a content creator, an area that has been relatively underexplored in previous research.

Keywords

TikTok, experimental digital ethnography, youth culture, self-presentation, researcher positionality

Introduction

After becoming available internationally in 2017 as a new short-form digital video social media platform (Schellewald, 2021a), TikTok gained immense global popularity largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Devlin, 2021). The rapid rise of TikTok reflects the growing influence of social media on daily communication since the emergence of Web 2.0 (Garcia et al., 2012; Hine, 2015). With its interactive, experiential, mobile and multimodal characteristics, social media has significantly transformed daily communication, providing novel avenues for people to connect and share information in the digital age (Caliandro, 2018; Kudaibergenova, 2019; Postill &

Pink, 2012). As a prominent component of social media platforms, digital videos blend both audio and visual elements and can be shared and viewed not only within social media applications but also via text messages (Murthy, 2008). Current research on digital videos primarily focuses on video diaries (Olson & Dadich, 2022), video (auto)biography

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(Kouhia, 2015) and digital video platforms such as YouTube (Lange, 2019; Schrager, 2020), Instagram (Caliandro & Graham, 2020; Márquez et al., 2023) and TikTok (Abidin, 2021; Şot, 2022). Notably, while most researchers collect videos from participants, particularly young people, to examine their self-presentations in different contexts (Abidin, 2021; Caliandro & Graham, 2020; Márquez et al., 2022; Şot, 2022), others like Lange (2019) and Schrager (2020) engage in collaborative video production processes and reflect on the resulting interactional dynamics, including both benefits and tensions. However, scholarly attention on the role of researchers as content producers on digital video platforms and its implications for the existing ethnographic methodological framework remains limited.

As a digital video creation and sharing social media platform, TikTok provides a valuable space for exploring youth culture, encompassing themes of gender and masculinity. TikTok has content available for all types of users, with a substantial presence of youth who engage with the platform regularly, thereby establishing it as an epitome of the culture of youth (Devlin, 2021; Schellewald, 2021a; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Social science research on TikTok emphasises its distinctiveness as a platform with features resembling YouTube, Instagram and all other platforms (Devlin, 2021). Additionally, scholars are interested in exploring TikTok's impact on digital cultures, particularly in relation to the attention economy, involving the commodification of people's attention and time (Zeng et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021). The algorithm of TikTok prioritises content over interpersonal connections, which provides increased opportunities for thematically focused participant recruitment and data collection (Devlin, 2021). However, a limited yet emerging body of research has addressed the methodological implications of TikTok for researchers working in digital research methods with regards to the app's interface (Light et al., 2018), digital content (McCosker & Gerrard, 2021; Schellewald, 2021a), algorithms (Rieder et al., 2018) and users (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Rodgers & Lloyd-Evans, 2021). This article specifically examines the methodological and ethical implications of conducting an experimental digital ethnography as both an ethnographer and a content creator to recruit participants and gather data on youth culture in Uzbekistan amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

I experimented with TikTok ethnography alongside more traditional forms of offline ethnography as part of my doctoral research on Uzbek masculinities (Zhao, 2022, 2023). Upon my arrival in Tashkent in early 2021, I encountered strict COVID-19 restrictions not only in Uzbekistan but also in my home country of China and in Australia, where my university was located. These restrictions severely limited my opportunities to engage with people and immerse myself in the local culture through offline observations. During my confinement to my apartment for nearly a month, my Uzbek friends informed me that TikTok was highly popular among young people in Uzbekistan. In January 2022, there were 24.05 million Internet users and 6.25 million social media users in Uzbekistan, out of a population of 34.16 million (Datareportal, 2022). According to a report by Start.io (2022), TikTok is one of the most downloaded social media platforms in Uzbekistan and there are more than .69 million TikTok users. Of these users, 50.4% are 18–24 years old and 48% are 25–34 years old (Start.io, 2022). Social media are a common space for people in Central Asia, especially the younger generation, to express themselves and participate in activism (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Wood, 2019). Realising its potential as an alternative method for participant recruitment and data collection, I decided to create a TikTok account in May 2021. My goal was to connect with more local individuals and gain insights into Uzbekistan during the COVID-19 restrictions, leading me to publish my first TikTok video. In May 2021, my first TikTok video, wherein I introduced the rationale behind creating the account, amassed 113,700 views and received 20,200 likes.

The significant positive response to my first TikTok video served as a strong motivating factor, underscoring the platform's potential to enable ethnographers to reach a more extensive and diverse audience. Subsequently, I endeavoured to integrate my research questions into the videos and position myself as both an object and a stimulus. This involved sharing my thoughts and posing questions pertaining to Uzbek masculinities as a means to elicit responses and insights from the TikTok community. For example, the questions included: (1) 'Should a good Uzbek man be married?' (2) 'Do you think I am a good man?' And (3) 'Do I need to travel a lot in order to be considered a good man?' Several of the videos gained immense popularity in Central Asia, accumulating millions of views in total. As of July 2022, I had produced 50 videos, amassing over 300,000 likes in total. The most viewed video had 337,000 views and 48,300 likes as of July 2022. Moreover, over the course of two months, my TikTok account gained an additional 19,000 followers, with a significant portion of both viewers and followers hailing from Uzbekistan. My experimental digital ethnography reported here differs from previous research, as I transitioned from a collaborative video production approach to a more independent and agentic role as both an ethnographer and a TikTok video creator. Following the introduction, I will present an overview of the existing literature on digital ethnography, with a particular focus on how digital platforms have reshaped social relations. Then I will provide a detailed account of the methodology with reference to my positionalities, followed by introducing how TikTok expanded and constrained research opportunities during the pandemic. The next section comprises reflections on the lessons and insights gained through the process of ethnography as a digital video creator. A subsequent discussion section will delve into the implications of this experimental digital ethnography, followed by the conclusion section summarising the key contributions of this article and discussing potential avenues for future research.

Digital Ethnography and Spatial Complexity

Digital ethnography surged in popularity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, during which researchers encountered substantial challenges in physically accessing the field and interacting with informants due to stringent social restrictions and border closures. As a result, many researchers turned to social media platforms, such as TikTok, as an alternative means of conducting ethnographic studies. Ethnography, as a set of participatory and observational methods for studying everyday life and a central concept of this article, has undergone profound epistemological and methodological restructuring in the digital age (Boellstorff & Marcus, 2012; Escobar et al., 1994; Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010; Miller & Slater, 2000). Conceptualisations of new methods of ethnographic inquiry into contemporary society, made possible by the Internet since the 1990s, include virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), netnography (Kozinets, 2010), cyber ethnography (Escobar et al., 1994) and digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008). These conceptions all share a similar nature, seeking to study how cultures and societies are presented in online spaces by adapting traditional ethnographic techniques (Airoldi, 2018; Hampton, 2017; Pink et al., 2016). Specifically, digital ethnographers often highlight that the domain of social media involves interactions spanning both offline and online spaces (Airoldi, 2018; Caliandro, 2018; Coleman, 2010; Hine, 2015).

Current ethnography of the virtual world faces more spatial complexity and fluidity (Caliandro, 2018) than earlier forms of online ethnography. Researchers focusing on online spaces in the 1990s tended to assume that online ethnography was partially disconnected from the offline world due to the underdevelopment of information technology (Airoldi, 2018; Kozinets, 2010). However, as a postmodern phenomenon, the boundary between the offline and virtual worlds has become rather blurred, with some scholars positing that this blurring signifies the breakdown of modernity (Hine, 2000). The confluence of recent Internet advancements and the profound influence of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an even more widespread integration of digital media into our daily lives, exemplified by digital platforms like TikTok (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). As a result, the previous digital dualism (Airoldi, 2018), or online–offline dichotomy (Hampton, 2017), no longer represents how most digital technologies are integrated into people's everyday lives (Caliandro, 2018; Hine, 2000). As our current social and professional lives take place both online and offline, how we come to interact with the digital reshapes how, as researchers, we theorise ethnography of the online spaces (Airoldi, 2018; Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Goulden et al., 2017). Furthermore, the restructuring of social relations resulting from the spatial complexity arising from the blurred boundaries between online and offline spaces has emerged as a central focus in recent ethnographic inquiries (Hine, 2000, 2005, 2015).

The (re)constructions of social relations in overlapping digital fields lead to interesting epistemological and methodological tensions that researchers are required to negotiate in the current digital age (Airoldi, 2018; Hine, 2009). In this scenario, Caliandro (2018) calls for moving beyond static online communities to more fragmented and ephemeral social formations (e.g., online publics) that users and devices structure around a focal object (e.g., a brand) in daily life. According to Caliandro and Gandini (2017), online publics are aggregations that are productive, networked and affective. However, there has been limited research exploring how researchers position themselves as a focal point to engage with online publics across both virtual and physical realms, and delve into the consequent restructuring of social relations during this interactive process. With this in mind, I seek to document and problematise the ethnography of the virtual world with reference to the experimental use of TikTok videos as an alternative to the study of everyday social formations.

Furthermore, the ethnography of the virtual world has prompted an ongoing discussion on its methodological and ethical implications regarding recruitment, data collection, consent, disclosure and research relationship (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Jackson, 2022; Kara & Khoo, 2022). In addition to maximising participant recruitment and data collection (Frampton et al., 2020; Jackson, 2022; Kara & Khoo, 2022), digital ethnography often leads to critical ethical concerns. For example, some researchers consider how online interactions may hamper careful and informed interactions between researchers and participants, especially in instances where the researchers cannot physically be present (Perrault & Keating, 2018). Disclosure of participant data when employing digital tools is another ethical concern (Jackson, 2022). In addition, ethnographic research has a history of the *Western gaze*, with Western researchers perceiving and experiencing the field with a top-down approach (Ntarangwi, 2010; Osanami Törngren & Ngeh, 2018; Hoong Sin, 2007). Some researchers argue that digital videos have the potential to reshape traditional research relationships by demarginalising the voice of participants (Bakken, 2022; Murthy, 2008). The utilisation of digital platforms in the ethnographic research of the virtual world presents a spectrum of opportunities and challenges. In this study, I particularly contemplate the methodological and ethical implications of conducting research as a digital video creator.

I consider my fieldwork experience as an experimental form of digital ethnography, rather than simply digital or virtual ethnography, because of its spatial complexity and fluidity. While experimental ethnography conventionally employs experimental filmmaking techniques to investigate and interpret everyday cultures (Russell, 1999), I seek to broaden this concept to encompass TikTok videos. To achieve this, I thematically analysed TikTok videos I created as well as the consequent restructuring of social relations across online and offline spaces. The analysis in this article primarily revolves around three key themes: (1) research opportunities, investigating how a researcher's various positionalities and identities as both an ethnographer and a digital video creator

influence digital research opportunities and findings; (2) research relationships, exploring how a researcher's trans-spatial self-presentation shapes the dynamics of research relationships with the participants; and (3) research risks, examining how the interplay of local and global socio-cultural contexts may engender potential physical and emotional vulnerability for both researchers and the researched. The intended readership of this article primarily comprises digital ethnographers, particularly those faced with limitations in field access who are intrigued by the idea of employing content creation as a method to study youth culture. In the following sections, I will describe my experiences as a digital video creator to provide insights into how the offline and online domains reshaped my self-presentations. The pragmatics of digital media further highlight the need to move beyond the epistemology of studying static online communities and a further tension for researchers who seek to both access and operationalise the digital in order to gain a well-balanced mix of ethnography of online and offline spaces.

TikTok as Methodology During COVID-19

My diverse positionalities and identities, encompassing aspects such as gender (cisgender man), age (millennial), education (international doctoral student), class (middle class), race (East Asian), nationality (Chinese), language skills (fluent in Uzbek and Uyghur), and marital status (unmarried) collectively shaped my interactions with viewers and followers, spanning both online and offline domains. For example, in all of my TikTok videos I spoke in Uzbek, the sole official language of Uzbekistan and the prevalent language in the rural and regional areas of the post-Soviet republic. This linguistic choice garnered significant attention from young viewers and followers hailing from these regions. Although my interactions with these individuals were limited, through TikTok, I became acquainted with a demographic that exhibited a relatively higher level of religiosity and predominantly belonged to lower social classes, in contrast to the Russian-speaking Uzbek communities predominantly found in major cities like Tashkent where I was based. Furthermore, my positionality as a young man from China also drew the attention of a cohort of young Uzbek men who displayed a keen interest in East Asian cultures. I will expand on the impact of my diverse positionalities and identities on participant recruitment and data collection in the reflections section. In my endeavours to enhance the popularity of my TikTok videos, I not only integrated influences derived from my diverse positionalities and identities but I also closely observed and employed popular video formats and background music prevalent among Uzbek and other Central Asian TikTok users. To ensure cultural appropriateness, I frequently sought insights from my Uzbek friends, carefully considering their comments and feedback on each video.

In the first TikTok video, I introduced myself, provided an overview of my research objectives, and elucidated the purposes behind creating the video. Subsequently, I pinned this video to the top of my TikTok profile for easy access and visibility. To cater to viewers who may not have seen my first video, I made efforts to inform them about my role as a researcher delving into people's perceptions of Uzbek masculinities. In situations where an in-person meeting with a follower was necessary for further discussions, I consistently prioritised informing them about the research purpose and acquired their explicit written or verbal consent before proceeding with any data collection process. In addition, since I opened my TikTok account, common questions in the comments and private messages to me as a TikTok video creator have included: 'Who are you?' 'What are you doing in Uzbekistan?' and 'Why do you choose Uzbekistan?' Responding to these frequently asked questions provided me with occasions to repeatedly introduce myself and my research to the field. I also took the opportunity to inform viewers about the possibility that I would utilise information from TikTok for my doctoral research, in accordance with the ethics approval obtained from my university and the host institution in Uzbekistan. As part of a strategy to foster digital intimacy (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017), I proactively responded to these frequently asked questions in both the comments section and private messages, employing the language preferred by the individual followers, which included Uzbek, English, Russian and Mandarin. Additionally, certain well-informed followers also took the initiative to introduce me to others within the TikTok community, fostering both online and in-person interactions.

Expanded Research Opportunities Through Aggregating Online Informants

In reflecting on my research, I observed that digital videos serve a dual role, portraying myself both as an agent in the research and an object of observation. Through continuous visibility, I gradually established digital intimacy with the individuals I was researching through TikTok. Noteworthily, the social relations that emerged from this digital intimacy were more fragmented and ephemeral than those formed offline, as my ethnographic data spanned both online and offline realms over time. For example, certain online interactions evolved into offline gatherings, enabling me to meet some followers in person for more in-depth discussions on Uzbek masculinities. This blurred boundary between online and offline spaces underscores the spatial complexity inherent in contemporary ethnography, particularly in the realm of the virtual world. The spatial complexity, exacerbated by the pandemic, unexpectedly broadened my research opportunities and provided valuable insights into my research topics. However, my research experience also underscores how the platform, particularly the algorithm of TikTok, regulated my self-portrayal, thereby highlighting the intricate nature of ethnographic spaces. Through the critical presentation of a

vignette below, I centre my attention on the impact of TikTok in facilitating outreach to a more diverse range of participants across various spaces during the COVID-19 restrictions. The utilisation of videos, comments and private messages facilitated the development of meaningful digital connections and intimacy, albeit potentially fragile, with both followers and other potential informants. This approach enabled me to engage with a broad spectrum of research informants encompassing diverse characteristics such as urban and rural dwellers, individuals from rural regions, and different gender, age, education, occupation and class groups. These findings suggest a need to re-evaluate the current conceptualisation of online communities and digital ethnography.

However, it is crucial to recognise that the aggregation of online informants can be significantly influenced and constrained by the platform, particularly through the implementation of algorithmic intimacy. TikTok's algorithm captures and reproduces the positionalities and identities of each TikTok video creator and viewer (Schellewald, 2021b), promoting videos to different user groups, thereby increasing their visibility through algorithmic intimacy (Rodgers & Lloyd-Evans, 2021). However, this process also creates boundaries, as the algorithm tends to recommend videos to users who are likely to view and like them, potentially limiting exposure to those with differing opinions or who may not resonate with the content. Moreover, the platform's accessibility can be affected by specific political and social realities in the local context. For instance, Uzbekistan restricted access to several social media sites, including TikTok, in July 2021 (Kun.uz, 2021), leading to further limitations. Since then, TikTok has only been accessible through a virtual private network in Uzbekistan, resulting in changes to the demographic characteristics of TikTok users in the country and affecting interactions with informants. Consequently, I lost contact with some informants who had previously frequently engaged with me through private messages on TikTok. The findings not only emphasise the need to redefine our understanding of online communities by proposing the concept of online publics, but also highlight the constraints imposed by the platform and its embedded social contexts. In the following subsection, I will provide a vignette that demonstrates how research relationships can be formed between researchers and the researched with varying positionalities.

Vignette: Forging Communities With Different Positionalities

In this subsection, I provide an ethnographic illustration of how my experimental digital ethnography contributed to the formation of online publics through heightening my digital visibility. Viewers engaged with my digital videos for various purposes, and the reasons participants initiated contact and expressed a desire to meet me were diverse. Their motivations ranged from aspirations to study abroad, to learning about foreign cultures and practising languages, as they found resonance with my various positionalities. However, being an object of observation also attracted hate comments from certain audiences, driven by ideologies such as racism, nationalism, xenophobia or sexism.

Through recounting my interactions with 28-year-old Jamshid and 19-year-old Ali, I will illustrate how my experimental digital ethnography via TikTok videos aggregated online informants and expanded my research opportunities. Initially, Jamshid left a comment on one of my videos, simply saying 'Hi'. Unfortunately, due to the large number of comments, I unintentionally overlooked it and did not respond at that time. Subsequently, he messaged me expressing his interest in learning Chinese and proposed an offline meeting to discuss language exchange, as he believed he could assist me with my Uzbek language skills in return. We exchanged phone numbers and agreed to meet at a local café. During our first encounter, Jamshid shared his aspiration to study in China on a full scholarship, revealing that he worked as an administrative assistant at a Chinese company in Uzbekistan, earning a monthly salary of 250 U.S. dollars. Having only proficiency in Uzbek, his time at the company had ignited a strong motivation to learn Chinese. Given my fluency in Uzbek, he saw me as an ideal candidate to assist him in learning the language. He inquired if I could teach him Chinese and provide guidance on studying abroad. However, I was unable to commit to teaching him Chinese due to other commitments at that time. Nonetheless, we remained in touch through TikTok, occasionally engaging in casual conversations via messaging.

Approximately six months later, another TikTok follower, Ali, reached out to me on the platform, seeking my assistance as his Chinese language teacher. In contrast to Jamshid, who hailed from a remote mountainous village, Ali came from an affluent family in Tashkent. Ali had decided to temporarily suspend his undergraduate studies at the local university to pursue full-time Chinese language learning, intending to support his father's business interests in China. At the time, I was available and willingly became Ali's language exchange partner, meeting on a weekly basis to practise Chinese together. Our interactions expanded beyond language learning, as we collaborated on creating TikTok videos, fostering a stronger bond between us. Over time, Ali introduced me to his circle of university friends and family members, further solidifying our connection. Surprisingly, one day Ali expressed his desire to introduce me to another TikTok friend, who turned out to be none other than Jamshid. Ali and Jamshid both became followers of my TikTok account due to their shared interest in the Chinese language, and their TikTok videos were frequently recommended to each other by the platform's algorithm. This connection allowed Ali to leave a comment on Jamshid's account, leading them to become friends. The interactions between Ali, Jamshid and their mutual friends, who shared a common interest in the Chinese language, led to the formation of a group of people which I refer to as an online public. Engaging with this group, I gained

insights into the construction of masculine subjectivities and aspirations. Through a combination of online and offline interactions with these young Uzbek men, I developed an understanding of how my positionalities and identities, as presented through TikTok videos, contributed to the gradual aggregation of this new group of participants, thereby expanding my research opportunities. In the following section, I will illustrate how specific positionalities of the researcher can be leveraged to engage with certain online publics, generating targeted research data and facilitating the research process.

Reflections: Considering Positionalities Through TikTok

Drawing on my ethnography as a content producer, I aim to elucidate the performative nature of self-presentation and how positionalities can be employed as a medium of inquiry (Berger, 2015; Chaudhry, 1997; Newton, 2022). Additionally, I reflect on the performative nature of being a content creator in the study of online and offline realities. By leveraging my positionalities, I found that various online publics, hailing from diverse economic, cultural and social backgrounds, perceived different facets of my digital self-presentation, leading to the aggregation of multiple groups of connections on TikTok. The following subsections illustrate how my self-presentation served as a stimulus for researching masculinities, providing insights into the dynamics of race, migration and nationalism among Uzbek youth, with critical reflections on the performative dimension of content creation.

As an East Asian Man

By presenting myself as an East Asian man in digital videos, I gained a distinctive vantage point to explore the intersections of masculinity and race within Central Asian society. One of my preliminary findings from offline fieldwork through semi-structured interviews was that a prevailing perception in various societies, including among Uzbeks, is that East Asian men tend to be more effeminate (Song, 2022). To delve deeper into this perception, I created a video titled 'When you say Chinese men are not cute', where I shared photographs from my life as an East Asian man. In the video, I wrote in Uzbek language, inviting viewers to leave comments on their impressions of Chinese and other East Asian men. Additionally, I included a comment asking, 'What do you think a good-looking man should be like?' as a prompt to specifically elicit their descriptions of their preferred physical appearance of a man in contemporary Uzbekistan. As of 30 June 2022, the video had garnered 82,600 views, 6503 likes and 1161 comments, with the majority of viewers from Uzbekistan. Notably, the most-liked comments included the following viewers' perceptions: (1) 'Our girls like Koreans.' (2) 'All humans are beautiful, and humans of all nationalities have their own beauties.' (3) 'They love Koreans, but they still prefer Uzbek boys.' And (4) 'Koreans are not real men.' The local Korean community and recent K-pop influences in Central Asia led Uzbek TikTok users to perceive me, a digitally presented well-groomed Chinese man, as Korean. These comments and their corresponding number of likes offered valuable insights into how Uzbek TikTok users perceive masculinities and gender norms in Uzbekistan. The remarks suggested that there are growing opportunities for the expression of diverse forms of masculinities, including the 'soft' masculinity I presented in my TikTok videos, albeit in a virtual realm. However, it is evident from the heteronormative comments that Uzbek women are still generally regarded as discursively subordinate to Uzbek men in various contexts, reflecting prevailing gender dynamics within the society. By portraying myself as an East Asian man, I gained valuable insights into how the viewers perceived me and encountered various perceptions of East Asian men and East Asian masculinities. Furthermore, by eliciting responses to questions on East Asian masculinities in the comments section, I was able to delve deeper into their perspectives and better understand not only their perceptions of East Asian men but also their self-perceptions and performances of Uzbek masculinities.

As an International Student

By adopting a self-presentation as an international student in my digital videos and sharing my educational experience in a Western country, I gained the opportunity to explore the migration aspirations of Uzbek youth and how such aspirations have influenced the construction and expression of Uzbek masculine subjectivities. In my endeavour to comprehend the migration aspirations of Uzbek youth and their relationship with social expectations and personal aspirations, I created videos sharing my experiences as an international student studying in Australia. One of these videos, titled 'Where am I studying?' showcased clips from my overseas university life. At the conclusion of the video, I inquired whether anyone was interested in pursuing studies in Australia where I was pursuing my PhD. This particular video garnered 34,100 views, 3131 likes and 239 comments. Among the 56 comments and 121 private messages received, many expressed a desire to leave Uzbekistan and pursue educational opportunities abroad, with inquiries about admission processes and scholarships being common. Moreover, several followers asked me to provide language lessons, particularly in English or Chinese, to aid their aspirations to study abroad or engage in international business ventures. For instance, Adil, a 19-year-old participant hailing from a small village in the Ferghana Valley, reached out to me through a private message on TikTok seeking advice on studying abroad. Following several rounds of consultations, Adil emerged as a crucial informant in my research, openly sharing his perspectives on Uzbek masculinities and migration. During our online and offline interactions, Adil revealed that he had encountered other young Uzbek men and women on TikTok

who shared similar aspirations for migration, prompting them to form an online group on Telegram to exchange relevant information. This online group highlighted TikTok's role in fostering online communities through shared positionalities and identities. Adil expressed that such an aggregation of like-minded individuals would not have been possible in his offline life due to the concerns surrounding infringing on hegemonic masculinities by seeking advice from young women. Through my self-presentation in the videos, I established connections with individuals like Adil who harboured strong aspirations for migration, thereby significantly facilitating my fieldwork and enriching my knowledge of the intersections between Uzbek masculinities and migration.

As an Uzbek-Speaking Chinese Person

My selective self-presentation as a researcher from China during COVID-19 in the digital videos provided a unique opportunity to understand how Uzbek youth perceive Chinese people in order to understand Uzbek nationalism after its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. I presented myself as an Uzbek-speaking Chinese person in the videos, asking questions such as, 'What do you think of Chinese men?' 'What do Chinese people eat?' 'Why do people hate me just because I am Chinese?' Through exploring how Uzbeks perceived and interacted with these different questions in relation to how I presented myself via video on TikTok, I gained some insights into how Uzbek nationalism works in relation to the othering of China and former Soviet Russia. In a video I created named 'Why do some people dislike me with no reason?' I shared my experience of being discriminated against in Uzbekistan because I am Chinese. As of June 2022, the video had 22,700 views with 3337 likes and 675 comments. Most viewers commented on this video to show me their support. However, some tried to explain to me the prevalence of Sinophobia in Uzbekistan by expressing their fears about increasing Chinese political and economic influence in Uzbekistan. Furthermore, some TikTok users claimed that Chinese people eat everything including insects, mice and cats, which are usually considered haram in Islam, implying that increased Uzbek nationalism in the context of pathologising other cultures, here particularly Chinese culture, may also have a religious nature. In another video discussing which language a foreigner should learn when they live in Uzbekistan, the 86 comments I received also helped me understand Uzbek youth's perceptions of the Soviet and Russian legacies in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The viewers of my videos were not from a homogenous online group, but from different publics and had remarkably different perceptions of the Soviet legacy and Uzbek nationalism.

Discussion

As previously mentioned, there is a notable dearth of research exploring the opportunities and challenges of conducting ethnography as a digital video producer. However, by utilising video creation to facilitate ethnographic exploration in the virtual world during the COVID-19 pandemic, I encountered unforeseen research prospects that significantly enriched my comprehension of youth culture in Uzbekistan. Employing an experimental digital ethnographic approach as a proactive content producer allowed me to gain access to a group of participants whom I would otherwise have been unable to interact with or understand. Through this approach, I effectively leveraged various intersectional positionalities to amass a more extensive collection of research data, thereby contributing to ongoing methodological and ethical discussions concerning online spaces and digital interactions.

The fragmented and transient nature of informants originating from TikTok adds a recent ethnographic example to the conceptualisation of online publics and explicates how it could significantly enhance ethnographic research. The digital videos I created covering a variety of themes brought together informants with diverse perspectives on my research topics. The mediated encounters between me and my informants surrounding each video were likewise largely algorithm-manipulated, mobile and multi-sited. Some interactions developed from online to offline and spanned geographic boundaries, demonstrating that the distinction between online and offline in Web 2.0 is increasingly blurred. In addition, emotional hate comments as a result of different ideologies such as racism, nationalism, xenophobia and sexism also contributed to the emotive nature of the digital interactions that were deeply rooted in social contexts. The shared features of my research informants who were all drawn to participate in my study because of my TikTok videos fit into the concept of brand publics proposed by Caliandro and Gandini (2017). Brand publics have three main dimensions: 'a common discursive focus sustained by mediation, participation structured by private or collective affect, and an aggregation of diverse perspectives on the brand where heterogeneity remains unsolved' (p. 88). Therefore, the concept of online communities is no longer sufficient to depict the present ecology and dynamics of social media platforms. Through this increased spatial complexity, I was able to circumvent the physical and social constraints of the pandemic and recruit substantially more research informants who were also more diverse. However, my findings also contribute to the literature by suggesting that online publics may be severely constrained by the platform, particularly the algorithm and local political and social contexts. In the context of the limitations on offline ethnography, my experimental digital ethnography case holds noteworthy methodological implications for researchers who encounter similar restrictions and seek to explore the virtual world by adopting the role of a content producer. For example, we must reassess the formation of the ethnographic object and the rationale guiding ethnographic engagement with the field (Hine, 2015).

Different from research that tries to reverse the gaze in the field through race, age, gender or culture (Bakken, 2022; Fort,

2022; Osanami Törngren & Ngeh, 2018), this TikTok ethnography illustrates a distinct approach to reversing the gaze through digital technology. By leveraging digital technology and the platform, the researched are empowered with the potential to dialectically challenge the gaze (Newton, 2022), thereby reconfiguring power relations in knowledge production and consumption. My strategic use of self-presentation through digital videos, wherein I portrayed myself through digital videos which were both an object and a tool in my research, contributes to the ongoing discourse on the dialectical gaze. Through digital videos, researchers can expose their various positionalities to a significantly broader community of the researched, setting this approach apart from the traditional approach of offline ethnography. By intentionally and selectively presenting various positionalities, researchers gain more agency, allowing for the expansion of research possibilities both quantitatively and qualitatively, particularly in the face of physical, cultural and social restrictions. Simultaneously, researchers can become visually materialised and conceptualised as objects within digital videos, which in turn become the subject of observation and discussion among the participants. On platforms such as TikTok, the researched now possess arguably equal power and agency as the researchers, determining their participation and mode of engagement in the research. They can observe and discuss researchers by creating their own digital videos, leaving comments and establishing their own communities. Through the utilisation of digital technology, researchers find themselves occupying dual roles as both subjects and objects simultaneously. This unique position allows them to reshape the conventional top-down and unbalanced research relationship, fostering a dialectical gaze between the researchers and the researched (Gillespie, 2006; Jacobsen & Kumar, 2004; Murphy, 2003; Rizvi, 2020; Taylor, 2011; Žižek, 1991). Similarly, Murphy (2003) explores the dialectical gaze through the performances of women who strip and finds 'the dancers are simultaneously in control because they watch and are controlled because they are watched' (p. 305). Engaging in the ethnography of the virtual world as a digital video creator gives rise to a dialectics of agency for both researchers and the researched, potentially reshaping their identities and the dynamics of the research relationship. In particular, digital videos introduce an experimental challenge to the historical Western gaze and a bottom-up approach, which has the potential to subvert the traditional top-down research relationship, all made possible through the affordances of digital technology.

Furthermore, engaging in digital ethnography as a TikTok video creator can give rise to ethical risks for both researchers and the researched. On one hand, exposing the researcher's biography through digital self-presentation in the field may unnecessarily bring certain physical and mental risks as a result of different social realities and ideologies. Researchers need to undertake extra emotional labour to deal with hate invectives and behaviours they may encounter in the field

associated with racism, sexism, ageism or nationalism (Benoot & Bilsen, 2016; Hoffmann, 2007; Jackson, 2022; Lo Bosco, 2021; Woodby et al., 2011). Specifically, exposing my identities in social media meant I was subjected to a great deal of racist, sexist and nationalist invective, which was amplified by the Internet. I had to process the comments that negatively affected my mental health status and seek help from a professional counsellor. In addition, some of my TikTok followers messaged me requesting the address of my apartment in Uzbekistan, which also led to concerns for my privacy and physical safety. In order to cope with the physical and mental risks, I shared my physical and mental concerns with my close friends, local supervisors and counsellors in the field and reported my situation to the neighbourhood police in case of any emergency. Furthermore, I created several videos discussing the racist experiences I encountered in Uzbekistan, and in response I received significant virtual support from TikTok users. This support not only alleviated my stress but also provided valuable opportunities to gain insights into the dynamics of Uzbek racism and nationalism concerning China.

On the other hand, ethical concerns arise for the researched, particularly regarding research participation and informed consent. The widespread reach of my digital videos, facilitated by the algorithm, resulted in exposure to a considerable number of users, reaching millions in some cases. As a consequence, a substantial portion of these viewers may not have actively provided informed consent or intended to participate in the research. This situation posed challenges in defining research participation and obtaining informed consent. In my efforts to address these ethical concerns, I consistently highlighted my research objectives and associated risks in the videos, comments and private messages. Additionally, when considering using any data for scholarly publication, I attempted to send private messages to the users to seek their consent. However, it is essential to acknowledge that many users did not respond, making it challenging to obtain explicit consent from all participants.

Conclusion

This article has investigated methodological innovations in social science research amid the pandemic, which imposed various social restrictions that affected my physical presence in the field. This study focuses on the opportunities and challenges arising from an experimental digital ethnography that I conducted as a digital content creator in response to COVID-related restrictions. By utilising trans-spatial self-presentation as both a research medium and an object of observation in the creation of TikTok videos, I engaged with diverse online publics via increased visibility. Through this approach, I recruited participants, and generated valuable data related to the research questions. Furthermore, I gained relatively more comprehensive insights into the field, transcending the boundaries between online and offline spaces. In addition, the digital videos that I created facilitated an

ethnographic investigation of masculinities on TikTok that extended beyond the confines of onlinzhaoe spaces into offline interactions. This progression defied spatial limitations, highlighting the performative nature of researchers as content producers and presenting a compelling contribution to the ongoing discourse on the complexities of digital spaces, online publics and digital ethnography. Moreover, this article has delved into the ethical implications of the experimental practices of digital ethnography as a TikTok video creator, particularly concerning potential physical and mental risks to researchers, challenges related to research participation, and issues pertaining to informed consent. The findings offer valuable insights for researchers encountering limitations in field access, particularly when studying youth culture on social media platforms, to help them navigate these challenges and gain a deeper understanding of their research topics within the online and offline worlds. Last but not least, it is crucial to conduct ongoing and more in-depth examinations of researchers' experiences as content producers on various digital platforms. This exploration, encompassing their roles as both an agentic research tool and an object of observation, will contribute valuable methodological and ethical insights, offering essential considerations for research methodologies in this rapidly evolving digital age.

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