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## Ethnographic Research in a Cyber Era
Ronald E. Hallett and Kristen Barber

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**Abstract**
Ethnographers have long been concerned with how individuals and groups live out life in social spaces. As the Internet increasingly frames lived experiences, researchers need to consider how to integrate data from online spaces into "traditional" ethnographic research. Drawing from two ethnographic studies, we explain how online spaces were needed to more fully understand the physical environments and issues we studied. In addition to discussing how we were led online, we present ethnographic data to demonstrate the epistemological importance of considering online spaces. While traditional methods of ethnography (i.e., in-person observations and informal interviews) continue to be useful, researchers need to reconceptualize space as well as what counts as valuable interactions, and how existing (and new) tools can be used to collect data. We argue that studying a group of people in their "natural habitat" now includes their "online habitat." We conclude with a call for ethnographers to consider how digital spaces inform the study of physical communities and social interactions.

**Keywords**
ethnography, online research, Internet, social spaces, cyber-ethnography, computer-mediated communication

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For decades, ethnographers have entered the spaces of their participants to gain a deeper understanding of how people experience, perceive, create, and navigate the social world. Michael Burawoy defines ethnography as "the study of people in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives" (Burawoy et al. 1991, 2). He argues that ethnographers must study people in their "natural habitat" to understand the fissures between practices and discourses, and to situate the micro-workings of an everyday life within larger social structures. Highlighting the hermeneutic dimension of the social sciences, Burawoy urges researchers to investigate communities on *multiple levels*. With the advent and proliferation of the Internet, people now occupy online as well as physical "habitats," and these spaces have become important for the creation and reproduction of relationships, identities, and social locations. However, the bulk of traditional ethnographers in the twenty-first century often overlook the importance of online spaces in the lived experience and thus miss data that could help them more fully understand the populations they study.

While Burawoy wrote at a time when the Internet had yet to take hold of the collective consciousness, it is no longer imaginable to conduct ethnography without considering online spaces. Technology is evolving at an exponential rate, changing the way people access local and global news, connect with others, form communities, and forge identities. Online spaces no longer rest at the periphery of life, but are central to and have fundamentally transformed the ways people around the world go about their daily business. Emails, instant-messaging, and Facebook posts replace handwritten letters. Blogs and websites have become more common sources of information than printed magazines and newspapers. Twitter allows people to post instantaneous and seemingly mundane updates about life. These spaces have also become sources of global news and political organization. For example, Michael Jackson's death "went viral," spreading quickly across the world as people updated social media sites. The Egyptian uprising in early 2011 has been connected in part to cellphone videos posted on Youtube and organizing that began on Facebook (Boyd 2011; Preston 2011). That same year, as a massive earthquake and subsequent tsunami struck Japan, people were told by government officials to use email, Skype, and social networking sites to locate friends and family because phone lines were unreliable. Even this paper emerged out of an interaction between the authors that occurred on Facebook.

As lived realities increasingly include online interactions, ethnographers studying contemporary social life should consider online spaces as another "level" or site where their participants live. Although the Internet has become a part of everyday life, few *traditional* ethnographers—and social scientists in general—make online social spaces an aspect of their research designs. Instead,

they tend to approach the study of physical space using face-to-face interviews and observations. Cyber-ethnographers, on the other hand, design studies that often look solely at online life by examining blogs, chat rooms, and other online interactions. While these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, many ethnographers underestimate, avoid, or fail to notice the role online spaces play in the everyday lives of their participants (Garcia et al. 2009), ultimately excluding a method of data collection that is epistemologically salient. While traditional methods of ethnography (observation and informal interview) continue to be useful, researchers need to reconceptualize what counts as a field site. We argue that studying a group of people in their "natural habitat" now includes their "online habitat." However, unlike cyber-ethnographers who focus on the process of doing online studies, we are not interested in conducting internet-based research; rather, we explore the importance of including online spaces into more "traditional" ethnographic research.

The adoption of digital methodological approaches beyond cyber-ethnography has been slow. Rogers (1995) argues that the process of incorporating innovative ideas and practices begins with innovators and early adopters before the majority takes notice. Those who accept the importance of online data collection may be frustrated by the limited infusion of what seems obvious: digital data collection matters. According to Rogers, how the early majority negotiates ideas frames how the innovative concepts will be integrated into mainstream thought and usage. This manuscript explores how two researchers who represent the early majority negotiated the process of incorporating digital data collection into ethnographic studies *not* designed to understand online spaces. We discuss the growing importance of online spaces in social life, review literature focused on multisitedness and doing online research, and argue why ethnography is a particularly crucial methodology for the incorporation of online social spaces. We then consider the process of integrating participants' online presentations into our own research projects, which were originally designed to study people "in the flesh." Unexpectedly finding ourselves in online spaces, we discovered that doing contemporary ethnographic research meant following our participants online.

We encourage researchers to consider how face-to-face interactions may overlap with online interactions, and to take seriously the ways their participants live life online. While there are ample publications focusing on the methodological processes involved in collecting online data, traditional ethnographers remain largely offline. Drawing from our experiences in the field, we demonstrate why these spaces matter in modern ethnography. We aim to convince this majority of the epistemological value of incorporating online spaces into their research.

# Life in a Cyber World

Online social spaces have changed how people communicate and interact. Having infiltrated almost every aspect of life in developed countries, computer-mediated communication (CMC) allows for quick and easy correspondence with large volumes of people. The most common forms of CMC include email, instant-messaging, synchronous chatting, blogging, interactive websites, and social networking sites (Beddows 2008). These sites, such as Facebook, provide people with a new context or "front stage" (Goffman 1959) for projecting public personas to an audience. In this way, CMC is integral to the construction of contemporary identities and communities (e.g., Watson 1997). Online spaces have significant consequences for how people live, and thus how researchers should study social life. Understanding how ethnographers have begun to integrate these spaces into studies that go beyond cyber-ethnography has the potential to inform the epistemological underpinnings of ethnographic research in the modern era. We demonstrate how online spaces influence everyday social life, and then discuss multisited ethnography and the process of adopting innovative ideas, such as including digital data collection, as an ethnographic tool.

## *The Overlapping Nature of the Internet in Everyday Life*

Use of the Internet in the United States has grown exponentially over the past few decades, with nearly 75% of Americans reporting using the Internet (Pew Internet 2008). Dissection of internet usage reveals that subgroups enter online spaces at particularly high and low rates. This is because the extent to which people act out their social lives online depends on access to and perceived utility of digital environments (Lewis et al. 2008). On one hand, college students tend to accept new technologies relatively quickly (Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis 2008), and youth immersed in online social spaces help to drive the desire for and production of new technologies. On the other hand, rural and lower income residences have less access to personal computers (Pew Internet 2008). Yet this digital divide is shrinking as the cost of personal computers continues to decrease and public access (via libraries and schools) increases (Wilson, Wallin, and Reiser 2003).

Interaction in online spaces has become such a central part of society that language has changed in response. "Facebook" not only denotes a specific social networking site but has also become a verb that people use to describe what they are doing on this site ("Facebook me about the party this weekend"). People "friend" and "unfriend" each other online and "tweet" updates about life. The speed with which people text and tweet has led to the need for

acronyms: OMG (oh my god), LMAO (laugh my ass off), or BTW (by the way). People incorporate these acronyms into everyday verbiage as well as electronic conversations, revealing the extent to which online and offline worlds overlap. Language continues to develop in order to provide words capable of explaining how digital spaces influence life. For example, "twimmolation"—being fired from a job after posting a quick, ill-advised tweet—surfaced to describe a series of high-profile individuals who lost jobs after a controversial post on Twitter (Poniewozik 2011).

Social practices change as digital spaces become embedded in a culture. People may feel anxious if a smart phone is lost or an internet connection gets disrupted, and making a New Year's resolution or celebrating Lent may involve forgoing access to electronic devices. The shift has led some individuals and groups to become concerned with overexposure to online interactions. Talk shows and psychologists have highlighted addictions to CMC, including efforts to develop a "psychometrically sound internet addiction scale" that would allow for adding internet addictions to disability classifications (Block 2008; Nichols and Nikki 2004). Internet Addiction Disorder involves excessive use, to the point that people's sense of time is distorted, they withdraw from offline social interactions, become angry or depressed when unable to access CMC, and their tolerance leads to a need for more technology (Tao et al. 2009).

The emergence of CMC also influences how individuals build communities, as social interactions are no longer bound by time and space (Nieckarz 2005). Virtual spaces can be used to build communities with others who may or may not be geographically distant (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Nieckarz 2005; Watson 1997). Individuals also can engage in multiple online formats or communities simultaneously, while also participating in a physical space or community (Gatson and Zweerink 2004). This reifies the ways people now occupy multiple spaces at once (Bakardjieva 2005). While some debate exists concerning whether people build bona fide "communities" online—insofar as there emerges an agreed set of values, norms, and practices (Bakardjieva 2005; Watson 1997)—it is clear that online and offline life can overlap in fluid ways to create meaningful relationships and ways of togetherness (e.g., Goodsell and Williamson 2008). Stern and Dillman (2006) found that individuals who engage in CMC tend to be more involved in the local community (e.g., attending events, joining organizations, and taking leadership roles) than those who do not participate online. In essence, CMC can complement or enhance, but rarely replaces, face-to-face interactions and social bonds (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Garcia et al. 2009; Lewis and Fabos 2005; Miller and Slater 2000; Williams 2006). Those studying this overlap of spaces argue that online communications are not inferior to offline communications,

or vice-versa (Bakardjieva 2005); rather they can interact to enrich each other (Hampton and Wellman 2003).

Digital spaces permeate all aspects of personal life, redefining people's relationships not only with other individuals but also with institutions. Businesses and organizations have found CMC a useful mode of connecting with potential customers, donors, and employees by using pop-up ads, email campaigns, and company websites to reach geographically distant individuals. Training materials have also been developed to assist organizations in using social media to widen their scope of potential constituents. For example, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2011) distributed a 14-page guide designed to inform local nonprofit organizations on how to use social media—such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs—for outreach, to advocate for social policy reform, and to increase donation revenue.

Changing the way people work and consume, business websites inform potential customers about products and promotions while also making goods and services available for purchase online. Businesses increasingly use CMC as a medium for conducting marketing research. Contacting individuals using web-based surveys and mass emails is less expensive than telemarketing, and businesses use these modes of communication to target specific demographics (Farrell and Peterson 2010). In the face of growing technologies, businesses have also reconsidered how they operate because resisting these technologies could harm their bottom-line. Borders bookstore has become a case study in how avoiding both online marketing and the creation of digital tools can cause problems for companies looking to carve out a future in retail. Borders worked from the perspective that printed books would continue to have a market while its main competitor, Barnes and Noble, created a digital reading device and moved toward internet-based consumption. Borders filed for bankruptcy while Barnes and Noble increased sales (Checkler and Trachtenberg 2011). Few, if any, parts of society have remained untouched by CMC, and so, ethnography as a whole (not just cyber-ethnography) needs to respond, adapt, and reflect these shifts to more fully capture and understand the multiple spaces—both physical and digital—where people experience contemporary social life.

## Multisited Ethnography and Online Spaces

Marcus (1995) challenges ethnographers to consider multiple sites in order to more fully understand social issues embedded within a complex, globalized world. He defines multisited research as involving "chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit,

posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography" (105). While binding an ethnographic study to a specific physical space may be appropriate in some situations, Marcus argues that ethnographers should be open to following participants and issues beyond predetermined parameters. This approach has been particularly useful in studying topics that transcend a specific geographic space, such as immigration (Hannerz 2003) and social justice issues (Scheper-Hughes 2004). In his famous study of book venders in Greenwich Village, Duneier (1999) employed a similar approach, the extended place method, to collect data in the different spaces venders spent time and experienced life, including the sidewalk, subway station, and at times their (often temporary) residence. Multisited research is not simply a comparison of different sites, but involves following an issue to the different places where it plays out (Hannerz 2003).

Such multisited research can create methodological challenges. For example, while one of the signatures of ethnography is in-depth analysis of a local knowledge and bounded space, "bouncing from site to site" can create barriers to achieving deep understanding of any one context (Burawoy 2003). However, Fitzgerald (2006) argues that such barriers can be overcome in multisited research if researchers develop a "clear theoretical orientation" and participate in "strategic site selection" (4). He also urges ethnographers to carefully manage their time and resources in these sites. With careful planning, multisited research can be a part of rigorous ethnographic work that reflects the postmodern, global context of life (Hannerz 2003) and helps researchers to make sense of social networks in different geographic sites. In his work on immigration, Fitzgerald says that geographic barriers need to be removed to more accurately understand mobile populations and phenomena that transcend a singular bounded space. Even the way ethnographers think about entering field sites changes. In the multimedia, digital context of the world, ethnographers can enter multiple sites without leaving their homes. The distinction between "field" and "home" erodes as researchers find access to participants online (Eichhorn 2001). We agree with this call for multisited ethnography, joining scholars who argue for the removal of false barriers between online and offline spaces in research (e.g., Gatson and Zweerink 2004).

The proliferation of online spaces in people's everyday lives has pushed some researchers to study online happenings. However, initial cyber-ethnographic research tended to focus specifically on online life (e.g., Adler and Zarchin 2002; Farrell and Petersen 2010; Robinson and Schulz 2009). These ethnographers wanted to understand how people forged identities, created relationships, and built communities in digital social spaces. Although this

research explored online space as a separate world, more contemporary scholars argue that life online and offline fundamentally overlap (Robinson and Schulz 2009). In accordance with a growing group of ethnographers (e.g., Lyman and Wakeford 1999; Ruhleder 2000), Garcia and colleagues (2009) argue, "there is one social world that contains both traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and sites of social activity" (54). Although cyber-ethnographers have begun to value offline spaces, how can ethnographers who privilege offline spaces and face-to-face research be drawn into online social environments? As Rogers (1995) notes, convincing the majority to adopt a new practice tends to be slow until these individuals become persuaded change is beneficial or necessary.

Although many scholars who take seriously the Internet as a tool for research tend to focus their analysis on online interactions, some researchers have begun to critically inspect the overlap between online and offline life (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Miller and Slater 2000; Murthy 2008; Wilson and Atkinson 2005). For example, Orgad's (2005) research on breast cancer communities included observations of women in their everyday lives and analysis of how these women created online support networks. Such work reveals that a combination of physical and digital data collection "gives researchers a larger and more exciting array of methods to tell social stories" (Murthy 2008, 839).

Even when the topic of interest is internet use, researchers may collect data online and offline. For example, to understand internet usage at home, Bakardjieva (2005) both interviewed people and studied their online footprints, or where they went online. She found that people make sense of their online participation in different ways, from instrumental searches for information to creating fun social interactions with new people. Understanding contemporary cultures requires acknowledging, respecting, and studying the multiple overlapping spaces where people spend time. Miller and Slater (2000) engaged in an ethnographic study of the Internet in Trinidad with the purpose of understanding how a cultural group adopted and adapted online spaces to maintain connections with those who moved away. They intentionally studied the interactions of participants in both online and offline spaces to document cultural, religious, personal, and professional interactions.

Building upon the theoretical arguments presented by Garcia and colleagues (2009), we draw from our experiences in the field to demonstrate the importance of considering online spaces when conducting research with "traditional" ethnographic methods. The multisited nature of our participants' lives required following them online to ensure epistemological value and depth of understanding. People rarely adopt new ideas and methodologies all at once. Rather, Rogers (1995, 2002) argues that stages of acceptance occur over time

beginning with the innovators and early adopters who first recognize new ways of doing and thinking. Innovators, in particular, accept uncertainty and eagerly explore new ideas. While cyber-ethnographers served as methodological innovators and trained early adopters who have fully accepted digital data collection, understanding how the early majority accepts innovation typically signals how it will impact larger systems. This especially is the case since innovation tends to stagnate until the majority adopts the ideas. While innovators and early adopters may be utilizing these methods, integrating digital data collection beyond cyber-ethnography has been slow. The time has come to move the majority of ethnographers online.

## Moving Traditional Ethnography Online

We draw from two studies conducted on very different topics to demonstrate how researchers who study physical spaces and face-to-face interactions may (or should) find themselves online. We focus on three specific online spaces: Facebook, Yelp, and corporate websites. One study investigated how the social context of undocumented students involved in ASCEND (Assisting Students Concerned with Educating, Not Deporting) influenced their perceptions of and participation in the educational process. The students used Facebook to connect with other undocumented individuals from whom they received information and support. The second study looked at two high-end men's salons, Adonis and The Executive, to explore the impact men's growing involvement as consumers in the beauty industry has had on the occupational responsibilities and experiences of a primarily female workforce of hairstylists, estheticians, and nail technicians. Men's hair salons are popping up around the country, marketing and catering to discerning, largely heterosexual, men who can afford expensive haircuts and the occasional manicure. The salons relied on websites to entice men into the salon, while clients turned around and reviewed the salons and their stylists on Yelp.com.

Our initial ethnographic designs involved standard methodological tools, including observations and informal interviews. However, as our studies unfolded, we found ourselves *pulled* into online spaces because that was where our participants were. The individuals and businesses in these studies posted information (and had information posted about them) on websites, and therefore digital spaces became an essential aspect of data collection. A bit of disclosure is warranted: we are not particularly adept at technology and do not design studies of online spaces. Our research questions do not focus on online interactions or the interplay between online and offline selves. Neither of us would identify as a cyber-ethnographer. Prior to engaging with these communities, we took for granted online and offline social worlds as separate

spaces that warranted different research objectives. We felt somewhat awkward and unprepared entering these spaces since we were not trained to collect data online. The following sections (told in the first person) involve reflections on the different processes we undertook to explore the online spaces that connected to our research. While we rely on our research experiences as data, we also briefly discuss what we learned from exploring these spaces to demonstrate the important epistemological benefits that emerged when we incorporated the Internet into our ethnographic fieldwork.

## ASCEND

The purpose of this study was to understand how undocumented Latino college students navigated the educational process. ASCEND was a student organization serving undocumented individuals at a selective public university in California. Given the changing economic and political climate, I (first author) was interested in how students utilized a network to access resources necessary to remain enrolled in college. I decided to conduct an ethnographic study in order to understand the political, personal, and educational uncertainty these students navigated.

*Offline beginnings.* My interactions with the participants began in person. I started by conducting a life history of one student, Julian. He later introduced me to the leaders of ASCEND, who granted access to the group. I participated in meetings and activities for five months, recording more than 100 hours of participant observation at political rallies, weekly meetings, and conferences hosted by the group during the 2009–2010 academic year. I then conducted semistructured interviews with group members based upon themes that emerged from the observations (i.e., experiences on campus, background information, educational history, involvement networks, and future aspirations). Waiting to interview participants allowed me to establish trusting relationships before asking them to discuss their backgrounds and experiences. The final stage involved member-checking, where I asked participants to comment on specific details of my findings, review my interpretations, and make suggestions (see Hallett in press for summary of findings).

*Entering online spaces.* During a previous study, I found that Facebook allowed me to remain in touch with highly mobile participants (Hallett 2012); this method proved particularly useful with Julian, who did not have a phone. I could email him and hope that he read my messages, but I learned quickly that Facebook was a more dependable way to communicate because he went out of his way to check his Facebook account between classes and several times

each evening. He posted comments about classes, relationships, and weekend plans—"Chicano Studies midterm … ☹ … oh well." He also posted news articles, videos, and commentary related to political rallies and immigration reform. On one occasion, he added a video of an undocumented student who was being deported. Along with the video he wrote, "Rally in front of senator's office at 1:00pm on Wednesday … hope everyone can come."

After attending meetings for several weeks, the group's secretary, Lara, noticed I was taking notes. "If you want," Lara said while pointing to her computer where she transcribed important points, "I could put you on our listserv. I send out detailed minutes every week. That way you would get other stuff too." I thanked her and wrote down my email address. The list-server was an important tool for transmitting information. For example, the group was preparing a conference they hosted for undocumented high school students that assisted with the college application process. At the end of the meeting, the person responsible for the conference T-shirts announced, "I will send out the three designs on our listserv and everyone can vote." The group leader added, "That is a good idea, I will also send out possible dates for the retreat."

I started receiving friend requests from other members. One of the group leaders added me to the ASCEND Facebook page, and a few weeks later Julian invited me to join the statewide organization Facebook page. In addition to having access to numerous posts and messages from the members, I also received daily updates about activities, rallies, protests, policies, and legal issues. The group strategically used online spaces to distribute information within the group as well as to a broader audience of allies who may not attend meetings. Prior to entering the field site, I had considered asking participants to journal about how they spent time and perceived the educational process. I soon realized students were already "journaling" on their Facebook pages, and these posts were more natural than I may have received if they had used paper and pencil to write at my request. However, I did not want to take data from Facebook without permission. When I explained to individual members who had become my "friend" online that I wanted to use their posts to supplement my observations and interviews, they agreed. Without much forethought, I found myself collecting data from both Facebook and the ASCEND listserv.

*Epistemological value in considering overlapping online spaces.* Incorporating online spaces helped me gain a more comprehensive understanding of how ASCEND members navigated the educational process and created opportunities for access to college. The two-hour meetings served as a point of contact, but Facebook gave members additional space to deal with issues related to

their undocumented status. My observations of interactions on Facebook illustrated how obstacles were fluid. For example, students noted online that an advisor recommended an additional semester of coursework, a career workshop raised concern about finding an internship, and books for the following semester would cost more than $500. These issues required locating financial resources not readily available to participants. In addition, students discussed family members or friends who were threatened with deportation, an immigration bill that promised to improve their status failed, and if access to food or housing was in short supply. Observing these conversations on Facebook helped paint a more complete picture of how life as an undocumented student involved uncertainty, and that those who viewed themselves as advocates had to be prepared at a moment's notice to attend a rally or make a phone call to a public representative.

I also found that ASCEND members embraced a collective view of empowerment—using terms like *our*, not *my*, struggle. Although finite resources existed (e.g., limited number of internships, jobs, and scholarships for undocumented students), individuals in the group used Facebook to share information about how to access resources. Lara posted, "Chicana/Latina Foundation Scholarship Workshop Tomorrow!!! 7pm-9pm in the library." Miguel posted, "a company that wants people to send texts … $10 an hour … let me know if you want the info." By observing these online interactions, I gained a better sense of how members collaborated to achieve individual and collective goals.

Facebook also reinforced and broadened relationships within the group. Members were invited into the online network after establishing a relationship in person. Leaders would "friend" new members and then allow them access to the group's online network in order to connect with "friends" of the group. ASCEND participated in state and national networks, and the online space allowed for distributing information and organizing events quickly and efficiently without geographic limitations. Nearly every day the state and national networks sent updates about federal policies and deportation cases. Although these issues were discussed during face-to-face meetings, online spaces allowed for ongoing and deeper conversations about these issues.

Whereas the offline meetings tended to focus on the collective identity and concerns of the group, online spaces gave individuals the opportunity to identify personal perspectives and needs. Individuals were invited to make announcements at the meetings, but people were less likely to mention individual struggles. Facebook tended to be a space where individuals felt more comfortable announcing a personal crisis. For example, one evening at 9:41 P.M., Pedro posted, "officially financially Fucked." During our interview, Pedro explained that he continually struggled to pay his debt so that he could

register for the next semester. Pedro received a few scholarships that covered less than a quarter of his $11,000 annual tuition. Within three hours of posting the message, he received 22 responses, including:

> **Jennifer:** lets go sell churros to fundraise for you..I am not kidding, lets seriosly do it.....how short on $$ are you??
> **Daniel:** am almost there too, ey we should throw a club event under your name so we can fundraise dude shit works you just have to sell tickets and promote the thing let me know and ill see what i can set up
> **Estella:** Churro Sale! Contact me so ASCEND can organize a fundraiser to help you. Thats totally doable.
> **Jennifer:** OK...its done! Churro, elote, mango Sale it is to fundraise for Pedro and help him stay in college....lets organize. Pedro, wanna lead this?? or should someone else take the initiative...tu diras home boy :D

Such online interactions allowed individuals to share resources, organize events, and receive emotional support. Pedro responded by posting that he appreciated the fundraising support, and that "just reading your comments boosted me up, thanks you guys ♭." The following week, ASCEND and a few other individual members sent Facebook messages reminding members about the food drive and fundraiser. The next day Pedro posted,

> all I can say is that I am so THANKFUL to have such a bad ass group of friends that have made my experience here not only possible, but worth fighting for. I will never give up and ill continue to fight until the end, for me, my family, and for all of you.

Finally, online data gave me insight into my participants as college students. While I did not want to focus on sensational stories of life as an undocumented student, the meetings and interviews revolved around experiences unique to undocumented students, including political rallies, policy updates, and scholarships for undocumented students. Observations—both online and offline—gave me the opportunity to see these individuals as well-rounded, complex people, not just undocumented. As students they pulled all-nighters, hated finals week, and looked forward to winter break. As members of families, they wanted to make their parents proud, grew frustrated with siblings, and became homesick. They were also boyfriends and girlfriends, interested in sports, and joked around. Students used online spaces to present aspects of their selves they found important. They wanted to be integrated into campus and society. Posts demonstrated how they were typical college students.

## Adonis and the Executive

This study examined how Adonis and The Executive marketed beauty to men. Because of the association of beauty with women and femininity, selling beauty to heterosexual men is no small feat. Building upon my previous research (Barber 2008), I (second author) was interested particularly in how these men's salons recoded beauty as "masculine." My research design incorporated ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews to explore how the salons' atmospheres, amenities, services, and labor were organized to produce a gendered brand image and consumer experience that appealed to men.

*Offline beginnings.* My research did not initially include online data collection. I considered ethnography and interviews to be ideal methods for answering my questions about gendered space and labor. If I wanted to see how the salon was masculinized, I would have to visit the physical space; and if I wanted to understand women's labor experiences at the salons, I would have to sit down and ask them questions. I approached the owners of Adonis and The Executive for permission to observe the everyday operations of their salons, and to talk with their stylists and clients. I spent 9 months sitting in the reception areas, out of the way of stylists who bustled around the salons chaperoning clients from shampoo bowls to cutting stations and manicure chairs. I wrote hundreds of pages of fieldnotes on the interactions between stylists and clients, as well as on the salons' atmospheres, products and services, terminologies, and amenities. During this time, I also conducted 49 interviews with owners, employees, and clients of the salons. Interviews allowed me to investigate what clients liked about their salon experiences, how stylists made sense of their formal and informal work requirements, and generally what people's opinions were about the men's grooming industry.

*Entering online spaces.* In the early stages of research, I used the Internet to locate field sites. I was living and researching in Los Angeles, and the congested highways meant it would have taken hours to scout locations in person. I Googled "men's salons" and browsed corporate websites to access information, including what services salons offered, their product and service prices, how many stylists they employed, and whether they catered solely to a male clientele. When a friend recommended I consider studying Adonis, a high-end men's salon that provided clients amenities such as beer, video game consoles, and flat screen televisions, I went online and found it offered a variety of services to men such as "hand-detailing" (manicures) and "hair camo" (hair coloring). I considered the website a tool for making decisions about the appropriateness of potential field sites, not a source of empirical

data. It was not until stylists and clients referenced websites during their interviews that I began to think of them as tools for learning more about how the salons engaged clients, and how clients forged masculine identities.

During interviews, clients suggested their relationships with the salons began even before they stepped inside the physical spaces. While some men stumbled upon the salon walking down Main Street and others had friends recommend them, many found Adonis or The Executive by searching online for a salon. One client, Matthew, explained, "I went online, and they had a great website. I think this is the generation where a lot of things are done online, so you need a website." My participants spent time online; and so looking for and exploring salon options via the Internet was easy and made sense to them. Even if a friend vouched for the salon, some men were skeptical or curious about the concept of a *men's* salon and sought further information online. To understand how Adonis and The Executive initially appealed to men, I needed to take seriously how the owners presented their businesses online. Rich in both photos and text, these corporate websites informed potential clients that the salons were designed specifically with men in mind. "We speak male, think male, know male!" proclaimed The Executive's homepage.

My move online was also prompted by difficulties gaining access to salon patrons. The owners were hesitant to let me solicit their often well-to-do clients for interviews since it did not fit with the "elevated experience" they attempted to create for the men (see Conti and O'Neil 2007; Stephens 2007 for a discussion of problems studying elites). While Veronica, the owner of The Executive, allowed me to request interviews at the bottom of a customer survey, Tyler, the owner of Adonis, did not want me interacting with, and potentially scaring away, any of his clients. I found myself having to get creative with data collection. Since I was interested in why clients frequented men's salons, how they found the salons, and what they did and did not like about their experiences, I turned to Yelp.com reviews. Yelp is a popular online forum where people post customer reviews of restaurants, salons, and the like. Online reviews are admittedly much shorter and contain less detailed information than I could gather via an in-person interview, but they also typically include a summary of the exact information I was interested in. While I initially turned to Yelp as a way to solve barriers in data collection, these reviews provided me insight into how clients evoked masculine identities while simultaneously discussing their manicures, pedicures, hair coloring, and haircuts.

*Epistemological value in considering overlapping online spaces.* By paying attention to the salons' corporate websites, I was able to better understand the branding efforts that distinguished them from traditional women's salons.

The first line of The Executive's homepage tempted clients to come in and experience a "grooming environment for today's man." In person, I observed the ways Adonis and The Executive were spatially organized and decorated to appeal to men, as well as how stylist–client relationships played out. However, an analysis of the salons' websites revealed that masculinizing beauty went beyond the walls of the salons. Potential clients who discovered or investigated the salons online could rest assured they were not at risk of going to their wives' salons. The Executive, for example, characterized itself as an "environment created exclusively with their needs in mind," and for "the apprehensive guy to entertain the idea of gray blending, manicure/pedicure, or straight-edge shave, things he might not be comfortable doing at a unisex salon." The websites acknowledged men's potential hesitancy with entering a salon, and attempted to set them at ease and safeguard their masculinity from the feminizing connotations of beauty by masculinizing both the salons and the services.

In case men were not convinced Adonis or The Executive were places they wanted to have their hair cut or nails buffed, these websites informed them of what to expect from a typical visit. The Executive was characterized online as a place for upper-middle-class men,

> A country club atmosphere, [The Executive] offers a traditional shoeshine stand, a private locker room, and 13 personal satellite televisions with over 700 channels so men can watch sports, news, or market updates. Our guests can read today's newspaper, check out the latest gadget magazine, all while counting on on-time appointments.

Televised sports, shoe shines, and locker rooms evoke the image of a hetero-masculine culture, and helped to uphold the salon's goal of providing clients with a luxurious yet masculine experience in "a male-exclusive, masculine grooming environment," similar to an exclusive country club. These websites indicated to potential clients that their association with culturally sanctioned definitions of masculinity and privileged class positions would be honored and upheld.

During my in-person observations, I saw stylists interact with clients in ways that were ego enhancing; they assured men they looked good and talked with them about sports, stocks, and the economy. The role these women workers played in masculinizing the consumer experience, however, was also salient online. The attractive, and often young, female stylists at both Executive and Adonis were used online as marketing tools. For example, Adonis's website contained a link to a sexy commercial that one client, Noah, described as "porn." The commercial featured eight women—all of whom

were employed at the salon at the time of taping—clawing at the front door of Adonis. They wore miniskirts and slid around on stilettos, pushing each other and trying to break through the front door. They appeared to desperately want the freshly coiffed man who stood inside. For a split second, Whitney (who was a manager and receptionist at the time of my study) licked the man's black polished shoes before pulling his face toward her open mouth for a kiss. This commercial depicted the salon as a place stocked full of beautiful young women. And more than using heterosexual tropes of beautiful women as marking tools, the commercial sexualized the stylist–client relationship. It suggested that having their hair done at Adonis would make clients heterosexually enticing, possibly even to their own stylists. Interviews with the stylists revealed that these marketing efforts affected their work experiences, as they continually negotiated heterosexualized interactions with clients who flirted with them and made sexual jokes.

Stylists' reports of heterosexually aggressive clients were supported by online Yelp reviews. One reviewer noted that stylists at Adonis are "girl-next-door hotties who offer you a drink." Reflecting the classed and heterosexual brand image of The Executive, another client described stylists in a review as "attractive and elegant girl-next-door types." In this digital space, clients held the salons responsible for fulfilling their digital promises—promises of a masculine (read in part as heterosexual) consumer experience. The fulfillment of these promises resulted in positive online reviews, which communicated to other potential clients that Adonis and The Executive may be salons but are not feminizing places, "There's nothing like drinking beer, watching ESPN and getting your hair cut by a really cute hair stylist. Highly recommended. Keep up the great work!" Another client remarked that he and his friend "were seated in their deluxe waiting area when we arrived. It was complete with flat screens, men's magazines, and complimentary coffee or beer! Sure it was about 10 in the morning but we weren't going to pass up anything that blatantly alpha male." Stylists picked up on their clients' heterosexual expectations, telling me during conversations that some men come to the salon for the "hot chicks," and then pointed me to the reviews as evidence.

My foray into online data collection was quite accidental. It resulted from the need to find field sites in a sprawling metropolis, barriers I faced soliciting interviews with the salons' clients, and listening to what participants said about being online—reviewing or reading Yelp reviews. By following my participants online, I found that social relationships between the salons, clients, and stylists were forged with one another online as well as on the shop floor. Corporate websites allowed Adonis and The Executive to create brand images to assuage men's presumed fears about going to salons and being associated with spaces and services dedicated to beauty. And Yelp allowed

clients to project private experiences and hetero-masculine identities into the public world. Using these digital spaces as another site or level of analysis, I was able to more fully understand how the processes of identity formation and negotiation of gendered relationships took place on both an organizational and interpersonal level, ultimately creating masculinized definitions and experiences of beauty culture.

## Reconsidering Ethnographic Practice: Moving Beyond Face-to-Face Interactions

The overlap between offline and online worlds makes the Internet a requisite tool for contemporary ethnographic research. Had we overlooked the role of online spaces in the lives of our participants, our ethnographies would have failed to capture the "multiple levels" of human interaction Burawoy and colleagues (1991) urge researchers to explore. Ignoring one space or the other would have dramatically affected our ability to make sense of how undocumented Latino college students close need-based gaps, and how men's salons masculinize their clients' hair and nail experiences. To paint a more nuanced and accurate picture of social life, Marcus (1995) encourages ethnographers to employ a multisited approach that involves following issues and participants into various spaces. We discovered that following our participants into different sites meant joining them online.

While some researchers draw arbitrary lines between online and offline life, this divide does not actually exist in a postmodern world where individuals present and construct themselves in multiple, overlapping spaces. This may seem evident to cyber-ethnographers who have interrogated online data for decades, but for the majority of ethnographers trained to use traditional methodologies and assumptions of bounded space, this is a big epistemological step forward. Approaching ethnographic research as if the ways of understanding social issues can be bifurcated into online versus offline overlooks the messy and multifaceted reality of life and place in the postmodern world.

The epistemological benefits of venturing online far exceed the discomfort of learning a new methodological approach. When we incorporated online data in the triangulation process, our research resulted in a more complete understanding of our field sites, participants, and topics. The incorporation of both online and offline spaces helped us develop more nuanced and accurate epistemological descriptions of gender, consumption, labor and educational access. Pragmatically, online interactions were part of our participants' reality, and so understanding these individuals meant understanding their digital lives.

While following our participants online was important to our studies, issues arose that warrant consideration. Online research brings unique ethical dilemmas, including issues of privacy in semi-private spaces (e.g., Facebook), gaining consent from distant people, intention of online participation, and anonymity when data are connected to personal profiles (Barnes 2004; Beddows 2008; Battles 2010; Beneito-Montagut 2011; Bruckman 2002; Elgesem 2002; Garcia et al. 2009; Gatson 2011; James and Busher 2006; Mathy, Kerr, and Haydin 2003; Miskevich 1996). Cyber-ethnographic scholars have worked through and around these issues for decades. Not having incorporated online data collection into our initial research design—a result of being trained by traditional ethnographers—meant we did not foresee these sorts of ethical issues. Facebook, Yelp, and the salons' websites all had specific structures and ethical issues. Without much forethought, researchers could easily stumble into an ethical dilemma, which magnifies the importance of moving these approaches into mainstream conversations. Further, employing traditional ethnographic methods (e.g., observations and informal interviews) and bounding space require negotiation and rethinking when collecting online data (e.g., Adler and Zarchin 2002; Beddows 2008; O'Conner and Madge 2003; Orgad 2009; Stewart and Williams 2005). Much research and theorizing have been done concerning how to best collect online data. While general methodological and ethical considerations about online data collection may warrant continued discussion, those discussion are beyond the focus of this manuscript.

A few considerations exist for traditionally trained ethnographers. First, time engaging existing literature exploring internet-based research methods is warranted. Many creative ideas will be garnered and ethical issues avoided by spending time learning from the innovative scholars who have ventured online for decades. Second, conducting a multisited study that includes both online and offline spaces requires careful consideration from study design and data collection to analysis and data presentation. The epistemological value of a more diversified collection of data exists when ethnographers take time to make sense of the conflicting, confirming, and divergent data gathered in the different spaces where individuals construct and present themselves. Prioritizing data from one space as more "valid" defeats the purpose of multisited research and rejects the social reality of postmodern life. Third, participants present different aspects of self when engaging different physical spaces (e.g., work or home), and the same may be true of digital spaces. Ethnographers need to be aware of how online spaces are structured and the ways participants utilize these spaces. Finally, digital spaces have become so integrated into life that many participants may not think to mention their online interactions. Researchers will need to

specifically inquire about digital engagement to identify how their participants engage in life online.

Although online research requires considering new methodologies and grappling with new ethical issues, the basic tenets of ethnographic research remain. As Murthy (2008) argues, "as ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. Ethnography is about telling social stories" (838). Essentially, ethnography is ethnography. Only now social stories of the human experience involve digital interactions. As technology continues to infiltrate social life, ethnographers should employ every method possible to understand the phenomenon being studied. As we show, grappling with the complicated relationships between online and offline interactions increases the depth in understanding complex issues in modern social life. Given the overlap between online and physical spaces, ethnographers deploying unidimensional or single-sited approaches need to justify their decision not to include both online and physical spaces into their research.

In an effort to move more ethnographers online, they will need training in research design that considers the interrelationship between online and offline spaces, as well as how to collect internet-based data and navigate distinct methodological and ethical concerns. Most popular qualitative methods textbooks either have abbreviated discussions of online spaces or ignore this form of data collection altogether (Murthy 2008). Those who do discuss online data collection often create a dichotomy between online and offline data. Our own methodological training in the mid-2000s did not include online research methods, nor did it involve the discussion of the Internet as a source of data. As people and communities increasingly live out life on the Internet, it is vital to the evolution of contemporary social science research for ethnographers to go online. As technology and the Internet become increasingly tied to everyday life, methods courses must include these spaces, and the unique methodological and ethical issues that accompany this sort of work, in the training of future researchers.

## Concluding Thoughts

While continued research and theorizing is needed, we argue that all ethnographers must consider online environments and how people experience life as a result of entering (or avoiding) digital spaces. It is no longer enough for innovators and early adopters alone to employ online data collection. The more traditional ethnographer, who privileges in-person observations, also needs to accept online data as an essential component of understanding social life. Ethnography as a discipline will benefit as the majority of scholars integrate digital spaces into explorations of contemporary social life.

The application of traditional methods to understand social life is increasingly inadequate because people are different as a result of entering online spaces. For example, asking students to construct a handwritten journal seems archaic in an era when many people use pencil and paper less often—reflections now involve short, frequent, digital responses. The rapid changes in technology and space impact the way people live life and interact with others; ethnographic methods attempting to capture in depth the processes of groups need to respond. We drew from Facebook, Yelp, and corporate websites, but other online spaces exist and new spaces will emerge. Our point is not to identify specific sites that inform ethnography but to illustrate how entering online spaces where research participants spend time warrants consideration by scholars who do not consider themselves cyber-ethnographers.

Imagining contemporary research where the participants or issues are not represented online in some way has become nearly impossible—undocumented students use Facebook to create communities and identities, salons have websites to project particular corporate images or philosophies, churches use twitter to keep their parishioners up to date on events, and knitting groups use meet-up sites to schedule in-person events and swap swatches. Even rural communities have websites that promote their towns, and disadvantaged or impoverished populations without access to technology may be represented and discussed online by others. If participants are *not* online, this too must be considered since the absence from online spaces reveals something about their social locations or worldviews. While ethnographers would be remiss to overlook important *physical* interactions between actors in their field sites, *digital* interactions have yet to be given serious weight and consideration by the majority of ethnographers.

Reflecting on our own experiences of being pulled online, we discovered that in a cyber era ethnographers must consider the Internet when designing and doing research. Since most participants are online in some fashion, researchers ought to ask themselves: How do online spaces inform and reflect the social issues under study? Why is a participant online or not? What are the motivations behind and impact of being in (or out of) online spaces? Understanding people, communities, and organizations in everyday life now means considering computer-mediated communication, and so ethnographic methods need to advance in tandem to more accurately capture social phenomena. Many people have a different frame of reference than ten or twenty years ago; they text, Facebook, blog, and use Second Life. Studying people and organizations without considering the digital spaces where they define, express, and develop communities, images, and relationship would be inadequate. The time has come for ethnography to respond.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

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